**Site review team**

**Review of the**

**New Jersey Sea Grant College Program**

June 14-15, 2011

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| _____ | 8/8/2012 |
| **Chair, Federal Program Officer** | **Date** |
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| **Co-Chair, National Sea Grant Advisory Board Member** | **Date** |

## INTRODUCTION

The Site Review Team (SRT) review of the New Jersey Sea Grant (NJSG) Program took place on June 14-15, 2011.

The SRT members included:

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| Dorn Carlson (Chair)<br>NOAA/NSGO New Jersey Program Officer<br>Silver Spring, MD | John Woeste (Vice-Chair)<br>Sea Grant Advisory Board Member<br>Gainesville, FL |
| Linda Duguay, Director<br>USC Sea Grant<br>Los Angeles, CA | Diane Detroye, Director<br>NASA Space Grant College and Fellowship Program<br>Washington, DC |
| Art Gold, Project Director<br>Region 1 National Water Quality Program<br>Kingston, RI | |

The SRT review was held at the offices of the New Jersey Sea Grant Program, which lie within the Gateway National Recreation Area in Fort Hancock, NJ.

Prior to the beginning of the SRT visit, and in conformance with National Sea Grant Office and College Program guidelines, New Jersey Sea Grant issued a public notice of the upcoming SRT visit by inviting interested parties to send written comments to the SRT Chair. Eighteen comments were received, all but two highly favorable, reporting on NJSG activities or the program in general, characterizing them as responsive, skillful, and valuable. Many commenters praised aspects of the K-12 educational programs, including teacher education and the educational experiences for children conducted on site in the National Recreation Area. A comment from the Unit Commander of the National Recreation Area described how valuable NJ SG's presence and educational programs are to the Area.

Comments from two nearby Sea Grant Programs complimented NJSG's willingness to work with and sometimes take the lead in regional and national efforts. One researcher commented that, even though his proposal wasn't selected, he was very favorably impressed with the rigor and the fairness of NJSG's research proposal selection process.

The only significant non-laudatory public comment was from a member of the New Jersey fishing industry sector. This comment letter opined that while the relationship between the fishing industry and NJSG has been collegial, significant opportunities to use NJSG's research and outreach capabilities to better the fishing industry in the state have gone unanswered. The letter suggested that this was a mistake brought about by the consortium nature of the program. The author recommended that the consortium be reorganized, allowing the Rutgers University’s Institute of Marine and Coastal Studies to take a larger role in leading the Program "to develop and deliver more science-based programs in response to the needs of the fishing community."

The Site Review was conducted June 14 and 15, and ended with a debriefing by the team to NJSG leadership staff, where findings, recommendations and suggestions expected to be included in this report were discussed. A debrief with the Chair and senior members of the Consortium board had to canceled due to unscheduled conflicts that arose, but the SRT Chair provided a telephone debriefing with the Board of Trustees chair and vice-chair and NJSG Leadership on July 27.

This report of the SRT follows the guidelines of the Site Review Team Procedures Manual. The SRT reviewed and discussed broad issues related to the New Jersey Sea Grant Program's: 1) Organization and Management of the Program; 2) Stakeholder Engagement; and 3) Collaborative Network Activities. Within each of these areas, the SRT report presents the findings and recommendations of the SRT.

**I. ORGANIZING AND MANAGING THE PROGRAM**

The SRT studied the documentation in NJSG's briefing book, strategic plan, and annual report, the presentations and discussions with the Program leadership and staff, the Board of Trustees of the New Jersey Sea Grant Consortium, the 501(c)(3) nonprofit that is NJSG's host entity. (To avoid confusion in this report, the New Jersey Sea Grant Program will be abbreviated NJSG or "the Program". The New Jersey Sea Grant Consortium, the host entity that receives the Program grant, will be fully spelled out or just called "the Consortium".)

The Site Review began with overviews of the Program's management, organization, and functional areas presented by NJSG leadership and staff. Claire Antonucci is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Sea Grant Consortium, and the Director of Education for NJSG. Peter Rowe is the Associate Director for Sea Grant Administration and Director of Research and Extension . Other members of the management team are the Fiscal Officer Augustine Anfuso, the Director of Communications Kim Kosko, and the Assistant Director of Extension Michael Danko.

Most of the members of the management team are either relatively new to NJSG, or new to their current positions and duties. They are all highly competent at their jobs, and bring a palpable enthusiasm and commitment to the Program.

The management of NJSG Program is different from other Sea Grant programs in that there was no one with the title of Director of the Sea Grant Program. In most or perhaps all other Sea Grant Programs, the Director is the PI of record on the institutional grant, and has the responsibility for overall Program performance and for interacting with the grant's Federal Program Officer and the National Sea Grant Office.

At NJSG many of these responsibilities seem to rest jointly on both the Consortium Executive Director Antonucci and Associate Director Rowe. Others, particularly regarding interacting with NOAA and the National Sea Grant Office on grant matters, seem to be borne primarily by Rowe. Rowe is listed as the "Project Director" in the grant which funds the Sea Grant Program, and both Rowe and Antonucci confirmed that Rowe is the primary point of contact with NOAA and the National Sea Grant Office on matters dealing with the Sea Grant Program and the grant.

Associate Director Rowe also has responsibility and authority over NJSG Research and Extension Programs . He reports to Consortium Executive Director Antonucci, who also has responsibility for the NJSG Education, Communication, and Fiscal Management functions.

Sea Grant Programs are occasionally organized to have a functional area managed by someone who does not report directly to the Program Director. Where this occurs, the Program's success can become overly dependent on the personal working relationships of the Director and the functional lead, and the Program is well advised to have institutional mechanisms in place that assure that all roles are precisely defined, and all Program functions integrate smoothly even if personnel or relationships change.

This is the case at NJSG, where Research, Extension, Sea Grant Administration, and (apparently) program integration rest under one individual (Rowe) and Communication, Education and Fiscal Management are

under another (Antonucci). But there is an additional component to the NJSG situation: overall program execution, responsibility, and overall supervisory authority, appear to be shared by two separate positions. This is unique in the Sea Grant network to our knowledge, and was cause for some confusion and concern on the SRT's part.

We were concerned that this situation makes it harder for the National Office to interact effectively with the Program, or even to know with whom to interact: the Project Director of the NJSG grant, or the person with overall supervisory authority for all who work for the Sea Grant Program.

We recommend the Program consider refining their Program leadership model to clearly identify a single individual with both responsibility for overall integration and performance of the Program, and authority over Program staff and resources --a Program "Director".

The SRT witnessed a situation that might be an example of a difference in emphasis of the two Program leaders, Executive Director Antonucci (who is also the lead for Education) and Associate Director Rowe (who led the creation of the Program's strategic plan). After the management orientation, the bulk of presentations on day one and the beginning of day two of the site visit were on the Program's highly successful education efforts. While these activities and their impacts were indeed impressive, the magnitude of the efforts seemed at odds with the goals and strategies of the Program as set out in their strategic plan.

The strategic plan accorded K-12 education a minor role--no more than a few oblique references in the plan narrative, and few related Objectives or Performance Measures. The SRT felt that the dearth of K-12 education mention in the strategic plan, when it appears to be both a cornerstone of the Program's efforts and a showcase of its success, might be an example of divergence between most of the Sea Grant Program and the Education component. We are not suggesting that there is too much education going on at NJSG, only that there is a disconnect between the strategic goals and strategies of the Program and its execution in the area of education.

The SRT therefore also recommends that care be taken to involve the Program's education component in all aspects of strategic decision making and planning. This will be especially important when the strategic plan is next updated or rewritten, but should also be done whenever the Program's direction is discussed by its leadership, trustees, or stakeholders.

The SRT had frank discussions with representatives from the Consortium and its Board of Trustees, including Board of Trustees chair Dennis Kearney and vice-chair Howard Parish. The Board seemed highly engaged in the workings of the Program, supportive of its staff and leadership, and genuinely committed to the Program's success.

The Board was reorganized in 2010. An amended constitution was approved in October 2010 with a set of by-laws. The constitution identifies 6 classes of Board seats representing academic Institutions, up to 10 public trustees. The Board has three standing committees: a) Executive, b) Finance, and c) Sea Grant Advisory. The chair of the Program's recently-created “Stakeholder Advisory Board” reports to the Board of Trustees.

In the time since re-organization of the Board, they have addressed the fiscal management and operational details associated with operating the New Jersey Sea Grant program and the marine science education programs operating under the New Jersey Marine Sciences Consortium. The new entity is chartered as the “New Jersey Sea Grant Consortium” and thus is the host state entity for the New Jersey Sea Grant College Program.

The newly activated Stakeholder Advisory Board and the newly reformed and renamed Consortium give the entire Program something of a feel of an organization still in development. Board of Trustees chair Kearney characterized the Program as a "work in progress".

The SRT was quite impressed with the commitment to the Program's future that appeared to be shared by all Trustees, advisors and Program staff, which bodes well for the Program's success. The relative newness of many of the Program's individuals and institutions, and the sense that the Program is eager to succeed and in some ways is poised for reinvention, leads to both opportunities and risks.

The Board of Trustees, while clearly well managed and highly committed to the success of NJSG, appears somewhat new to the idea of providing strategic leadership to the Program. While they had clear ideas about how to assure that the Program operated effectively, they were less clear on what the Program's mission should be, or how that mission would translate into specific actions, goals, and priorities. Given the quality and placement of the individuals on the Board of Trustees, a stronger sense of strategic leadership could not but help improve the Program's value to New Jersey and the country.

Similarly, the Stakeholder Advisory Committee was very engaged with the Program and highly supportive of it, but at times during their interaction with the SRT seemed unsure of how aggressively they should voice their advice to the Program.

NJSG Program leadership might want to seize the opportunity to provide some formal orientation and training to both the Board of Trustees and the Stakeholder Advisory Committee, to let them learn more of the Program's past and present, and how it views its future. Especially in the context of the preparing to update of the strategic plan, which will occur soon, such orientation and training will help empower both of these groups to contribute to the strategic choices that the Program will be making over the next few years.

NJSG is one of the few Programs in the network whose host entity is a consortium of institutions of higher learning, and in many ways the nature of New Jersey's consortium is unique in the network. The time might be right for the Program and the Consortium to explore ways in which the nature of that relationship could be exploited to get the most out of the Sea Grant Program. The academic disciplines available among all the Consortium members is quite diverse, for example, providing a broad pool of talent from which PIs or participants for Sea Grant research or other activities might be recruited.

On the fiscal level, as one of the stakeholders noted, some state agencies have a much easier time funding the Consortium to carry out marine science or stewardship initiatives that they might have funding an individual university. The Program already has an impressive track record of partnering with private industry as well. Such funding and partnering opportunities should be continued or expanded. There might also be opportunities for fundraising that take advantage of the Consortium's 501(c)(3) structure not available to university-based Sea Grant Programs. The consortium model might also make it easier for this Program to seek out and accept private funding from current or future private sector project partners. We suggest the Program explore this possible opportunity.

There was not enough time during the site visit for the SRT to gain a clear picture of how the research portfolio is managed at NJSG, or how well research is integrated into the other components of the Program. From the information that was provided, the Program appears conscientious in maintaining the scientific rigor of its research project selection process, and in ensuring that links are made between selected research and other Program components.

Some questions about research were not answered during the site visit. What is NJSG's research strategy? What is the intent of development grants, and how does NJSG select topics and investigators

for developmental grants? What is the process for final selection of priority topics for the RFP? What is the role of extension and the SAB in screening of pre-proposals? Does the RFP try to generate a critical mass of related projects within a given Omnibus, does it create life cycle planning for research topics?

Past site reviews had noted the need for better research-extension integration, and a transition appeared to have occurred in the philosophy of the Program leadership, and the development of the research and extension programs. Extension staff is now involved in the setting of the research program priorities and review of research proposals. We commend this progress, and encourage work to continue toward increasing the integration between research and extension priorities focused on meeting the concerns of the New Jersey citizens.

**II. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

The SRT heard positive comments from and about NJSG's stakeholders, including community groups, state governments, state universities (including Rutgers and other Consortium members), and both K-12 and free-choice educators. The Program's stakeholder interactions are largely the result of the work of extension and education staff with the many groups involved in the existing programs.

The Program's efforts are well appreciated by stakeholders as well as state and local partners serving those stakeholders, and by and large are well planned and evaluated.

Stakeholder interactions appear to be well targeted, although it is not always obvious how decisions are made concerning which stakeholders, or which stakeholder sectors, to target. It was not clear from the briefing book or presentations how diverse the set of Program stakeholders are, or how much effort NJSG puts into assuring that its projects reach a diverse set of stakeholders. It might be helpful for NJSG to consider compiling a report on the effectiveness of efforts and outcomes directed to diverse – and potentially underserved -- audiences.

Assessment appears to be largely focused on honing and improving the value of existing programs to existing stakeholders. Education has a well defined evaluation and assessment component. The extension and communication programs should also develop assessment approaches that will enable program refinement. Assessment needs to be an integral component of program delivery and planning. The extension programs also need to assure that Sea Grant is not missing key audiences.

Existing programs have generated impressive numbers of participants and a loyal and committed set of volunteers. The educational programs targeted to K-12 are particularly noteworthy with their focus on building public awareness and links to required elements of NJ curriculum. The undergraduate involvement in K-12, and the common curricula for delivering coastal science to multiple colleges throughout NJ, are excellent. The Program also makes exceptional use of its Sandy Hook location in its public awareness efforts and as a resource to schools, the public and community programs.

The new extension hires for aquaculture/fisheries and coastal communities should further improve the capacity for problem solving and stakeholder engagement.

Sea Grant should consider ways to assure that funded research is responsive to stakeholder needs. This might be achieved by

- pinpointing development research grant funds to engage researchers and research into extension programs. An excellent example of using this approach to achieve real impact is the nurturing of Louise Wotton's efforts on invasive dune plants.

- empowering and charging the fledgling Stakeholder Advisory Board to more aggressively point out stakeholder needs that could or should be met with integrated Program research, extension or education efforts.

- creating priority topics within the Omnibus Research RFP that will address knowledge gaps that constrain the effectiveness of extension programs.

- requiring that successful research proposals address the priorities of extension programs and the Stakeholder Advisory Board. This is not the same as funding selection strictly based on "the best science", and may require Program leadership to exercise increased discretion on project selection, rather than deferring to the scores of the technical evaluation panel.

**III. COLLABORATIVE NETWORK/NOAA ACTIVITIES**

NJSG plays an energetic role in the Sea Grant network nationally and regionally, and actively participates with NOAA and other agencies on issues of mutual interest.

A number of examples were presented of the Program collaborating with other local and regional entities that received funding from NOAA, for example:

- The Program and its partners conducted a community resilience pilot project involving the communities of Cape May Point, Little Silver, and Oceanport. This project to help communities assess their vulnerabilities to, and to improve their resiliency against coastal hazards and sea level rise.

- New Jersey Sea Grant has been an active partner in the Mid-Atlantic Regional Association for Coastal Ocean Observing Systems, as well as in the Sea Grant-led Mid-Atlantic and New York Bight Sea Grant Regional Research Planning initiatives.

- Assembly of Sea Grant Extension Program Leaders, Dr. Peter Rowe, Executive Committee 2010-2012

- Mid Atlantic Sea Grant Extension Program Leaders Committee, Dr. Peter Rowe; Mid Atlantic Sea Grant Regional Research Planning Steering Committee, Dr. Peter Rowe; Sea Grant Coastal Hazards and Climate Network, Dr. Jon Miller; National Sea Grant Educator's Network, Claire Antonucci

## IV. FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS and SUGGESTIONS

Findings

- All of those involved with the Program--staff and leadership, trustees, and stakeholders--seem united in a commitment to see the Program succeed.

- The Board of Trustees which oversees the Consortium and the Program were especially impressive in their sense of ownership and purpose, and their willing to commit their own time and resources at the Board's disposal toward the Program's success.

- The Program has made many changes in its staff and boards: new people, people in new roles, new institutions (e.g. the stakeholder advisory committee). Program is at the point where it has opportunities to reinvent itself in some ways.

- The Host entity's consortium structure is rare in the Sea Grant network, and affords some unique opportunities for New Jersey Sea Grant in terms of the intellectual breadth i and other resources on which it can draw, and the nature and number of partners it can effectively engage.

Recommendations (items the Program must consider)

- Consider refining the Program leadership model to more clearly identify the single individual with responsibility for overall integration and performance of the Program, and authority over Program staff and resources --the Program "Director".

- Reconcile the apparent disconnect between Program's education component and its strategic decision making and planning. This will be especially important when the strategic plan is next updated or rewritten, but should be done whenever the Program is discussed by its leadership, trustees, or stakeholders.

Suggestions (ideas the Program may want to consider)

- NJSG Program leadership might want to provide formal orientation and training to both the Board of Trustees and the stakeholder advisory committee, to let them learn more of the Program's past and present, and how it views its future. Such orientation and training will help empower both of these groups to better provide guidance on what the Program should be doing, and contribute to the strategic choices that the Program will be making over the next few years.

- Continue to seek creative ways to make use of the Consortium's unique structure to help address the Program's strategic, operational, and financial goals. For example, exploring opportunities for financial support of consortium projects by private sector partners.

- Sea Grant should consider ways to assure that funded research is responsive to stakeholder needs, such as those suggested in section II above.